

Chapter 23

A Black Revolutionary Leader in Haiti:

Toussaint L'Ouverture

(1797)

François Dominique Toussaint L'Ouverture

Introduction

When revolution broke out in France, it was almost inevitable that the French overseas colonies would also experience some type of upheaval. In the French colony of Saint-Domingue (now Haiti), a native leader would emerge to lead the Haitians in revolt. The history of the Revolution in Saint-Domingue is made more complex by the role of race, the issue of slavery, and the very real threat of English invasion. The colony's value to France for its sugar exports further complicated things. In this confused arena François Dominique Toussaint L'Ouverture (1743-1803) took control of the revolution. Born a slave, Toussaint was afforded the opportunity by his master to become educated. Before the Revolution he had risen to a position of respect and authority within the slave community. At first he supported the monarchy, but gradually assumed a more republican stance. From the very beginning, even as a soldier of the king, Toussaint had as one of his prime objectives a significant change in the status of the black inhabitants of the island. While sensitive to the needs and rights of all inhabitants, Toussaint was unwavering in his pursuit of the abolition of slavery. In this document, Toussaint warns the Directory (the executive committee which ran the government between the Reign of Terror and Napoleon Bonaparte's coup in 1799) against any attempt to reimpose slavery. Successful in thwarting Paris's desires at this juncture, he would not be so lucky three years later. In 1800 Napoleon Bonaparte attempted to reimpose slavery; when Toussaint resisted, he was captured and brought to France where he died three years later. Napoleon, however, was unable to subjugate the island.

Questions to Consider

- What language does Toussaint use in his letter to the French Directory?
- Are his arguments valid, given the historical context in which they are employed? Can they be denied by the French authorities?

Source

The impolitic and incendiary discourse of Vaublanc has not affected the blacks nearly so much as their certainty of the projects which the proprietors of San Domingo are planning: insidious declarations should not have any effect in the eyes of wise legislators who have decreed liberty for the nations. But the attempts on that liberty which the colonists propose are all the more to be feared because it is with the veil of patriotism that they cover their detestable plans. We know that they seek to impose some of them on you by illusory and specious promises, in order to see renewed in this colony its former scenes of horror. Already perfidious emissaries have stepped in

1 among us to ferment the destructive leaven prepared by the hands of libticides. But they will
2 not succeed. I swear it by all that liberty holds most sacred. My attachment to France, my
3 knowledge of the blacks, make it my duty not to leave you ignorant either of the crimes which
4 they meditate or the oath that we renew, to bury ourselves under the ruins of a country revived
5 by liberty rather than suffer the return of slavery.

7 It is for you, Citizens Directors, to turn from over our heads the storm which the eternal enemies
8 of our liberty are preparing in the shades of silence. It is for you to enlighten the legislature, it is
9 for you to prevent the enemies of the present system from spreading themselves on our
10 unfortunate shores to sully it with new crimes. Do not allow our brothers, our friends, to be
11 sacrificed to men who wish to reign over the ruins of the human species. But no, your wisdom
12 will enable you to avoid the dangerous snares which our common enemies hold out for you....

14 I send you with this letter a declaration which will acquaint you with the unity that exists
15 between the proprietors of San Domingo who are in France, those in the United States, and those
16 who serve under the English banner. You will see there a resolution, unequivocal and carefully
17 constructed, for the restoration of slavery; you will see there that their determination to succeed
18 has led them to envelop themselves in the mantle of liberty in order to strike it more deadly
19 blows. You will see that they are counting heavily on my complacency in lending myself to their
20 perfidious views by my fear for my children. It is not astonishing that these men who sacrifice
21 their country to their interests are unable to conceive how many sacrifices a true love of country
22 can support in a better father than they, since I unhesitatingly base the happiness of my children
23 on that of my country, which they and they alone wish to destroy.

25 I shall never hesitate between the safety of San Domingo and my personal happiness; but I have
26 nothing to fear. It is to the solicitude of the French Government that I have confided my
27 children.... I would tremble with horror if it was into the hands of the colonists that I had sent
28 them as hostages; but even if it were so, let them know that in punishing them for the fidelity of
29 their father, they would only add one degree more to their barbarism, without any hope of ever
30 making me fail in my duty.... Blind as they are! They cannot see how this odious conduct on
31 their part can become the signal of new disasters and irreparable misfortunes, and that far from
32 making them regain what in their eyes liberty for all has made them lose, they expose themselves
33 to a total ruin and the colony to its inevitable destruction. Do they think that men who have been
34 able to enjoy the blessing of liberty will calmly see it snatched away? They supported their
35 chains only so long as they did not know any condition of life more happy than that of slavery.
36 But to-day when they have left it, if they had a thousand lives they would sacrifice them all
37 rather than be forced into slavery again. But no, the same hand which has broken our chains will
38 not enslave us anew. France will not revoke her principles, she will not withdraw from us the
39 greatest of her benefits. She will protect us against all our enemies; she will not permit her
40 sublime morality to be perverted, those principles which do her most honour to be destroyed, her
41 most beautiful achievement to be degraded, and her Decree of 16 Pluviôse which so honors
42 humanity to be revoked. But if, to re-establish slavery in San Domingo, this was done, then I
43 declare to you it would be to attempt the impossible: we have known how to face dangers to
44 obtain our liberty, we shall know how to brave death to maintain it.

46 This, Citizens Directors, is the morale of the people of San Domingo, those are the principles

1 that they transmit to you by me.

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3 My own you know. It is sufficient to renew, my hand in yours, the oath that I have made, to
4 cease to live before gratitude dies in my heart, before I cease to be faithful to France and to my
5 duty, before the god of liberty is profaned and sullied by the liberticides, before they can snatch
6 from my hands that sword, those arms, which France confided to me for the defence of its rights
7 and those of humanity, for the triumph of liberty and equality.

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11 **Source:** François Dominique Toussaint L'Ouverture, Letter, in C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 2d ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 195-197.